

**Transcription**
**Open Submissions Workshop #7**

Video (with closed captions): https://youtu.be/MVfSJr9H4Ug

[♪ Gentle electronic music]

NATASHA SUTTON WILLIAMS:

Hello, and welcome to our talk on writing with and representing disability in theatre. My name is Natasha Sutton Williams, and I'm a playwright, a composer, an actor and a journalist.

MATILDA IBINI:

And my name is Matilda Ibini, and I'm a playwright, screenwriter and I like to think of myself as a theatre-maker too. And so a quick disclaimer about our talk: It will be very informal. It'll just be me and Natasha, having a chat. So we'll be talking about our experiences of writing and creating theatre around disability and disabled characters

So all of this is kind of based on our own experiences. So it's not gospel. We're not coming from a place of authority. It's more us as artists reaching out to other artists. So take anything that works for you, anything that doesn't – discard. But just kind of everything we say, you can take with a pinch of salt.

NATASHA SUTTON WILLIAMS:

And your own techniques may work better than what we're discussing. And, obviously, theatre is an evolving entity, so we're all learning. And the representation of disability may be quite different in six months time, In a year's time, in five years time, so we're all kind of learning together. And also specificity is key when we're talking about disability because it's such a broad term.

So in terms of my experience, I am writing a musical called *Lesbian Pirates*. Which is about the real-life lesbian pirates Anne Bonny and Mary Read in 1717, battling the patriarchy in the Caribbean. And that show is disability-led so the protagonists are disabled, and many of the other cast are disabled, and I am very interested in representing disabled characters’ sexuality and their desires. And so *Lesbian Pirates* is very much a piece about sexuality and disability as well as a host of other things.

MATILDA IBINI:

And in my experience of writing, I've written or tend to write a lot of characters with either physical impairments or wheelchair users, as I myself am a wheelchair user, so that's where a lot of my stories and experiences come from. So I wrote a play called *Little Miss Burden* which was an autobiographical play about growing up with two non-disabled siblings in a very Christian Nigerian household in East London. And in real life, in my family, I was the only person with a disability, and so was the character in the story, and again that story is very specific about the experiences of growing up with a physical impairment. And that, is why specificity key is because I feel comfortable writing about characters with physical impairments. But that's a whole different ballgame, when you're writing about maybe characters with a visual impairment or characters who are Deaf, so specifying or at least knowing what kind of disability your character has is key to developing them.

And also knowing the kind of inner workings of that disability, both, you know, psychologically physically. Obviously, there's lots of invisible disabilities that we're kind of representing more.

What you know spiritually, sexually all these kind of things, so we really want to create three-dimensional characters whether they're disabled or not. So as part of your craft as a writer, part of your job is to thoroughly develop three-dimensional characters, regardless of whether they're disabled or not. So you do need just as much development and thought about a disabled character's journey as much as any other character. You also need to develop secondary and peripheral characters, not just your main characters.

So when if you've got a play and you've got your protagonists, your main character but you've got four other characters. Even if they only come in for one scene, you need to know their background, you need to know their foreground, what's going to happen to them in the future. You need to know all about their thoughts and feelings, their triggers, their secrets. So what we're saying is it's not just about pprotagonists and disabled protagonists. If you have a disabled secondary character or peripheral character, you really need to understand their whole world and their whole state of being.

MATILDA IBINI:

Yeah, I find especially writing for disabled protagonists where they're the main character, it's really important to explore who they are as a character. So you know, in real life no one person is made up of their – they're not just their condition or their disability but they have so many other facets to their identity and those things are worth exploring, too, when you're creating your characters. And you want to really interrogate why this character is disabled, essentially. And how that affects their perspective in the story, as a character, their relationships to other people. You want to explore how that rubs up against the story, or not, but what you want to be mindful of is to not to perpetuate a stereotype. So you want to really interrogate your story, your characters, their intentions, their motives, but also how their disability also plays a part in that. That their disability is more than just a plot point.

NATASHA SUTTON WILLIAMS:

Yeah, and when you're writing for disabled secondary or peripheral characters, as I said all disabled or non-disabled characters should be developed, even if they're not the main characters. They need to be just as rich, just as colourful and deep as the protagonist. And essentially not just a mouthpiece for information or exposition. Again, this is whether the character is disabled or not, but if they are disabled in a secondary or a peripheral character. Just having a really serious think about how that disability affects the story, how it affects them, maybe how it affects other people in relation to them. But they need to be just as rich because, let's say you turn the story on its head and something when – actually I want to tell this story from this secondary character's point of view, and now they're going to be my main character. It's just having a very, very rich world.

MATILDA IBINI:

Exactly, and I think it's just like all the characters you write. They all have flaws, and the most compelling characters have really intricate, interesting flaws, and that's no different from writing disabled characters. Your disabled characters, too, should have flaws. Because at the end of day, we're all human. So it's – I think you have to go beyond what you've seen perpetuated in mainstream society and stories in terms of disabled people or disabled characters are not just saints or villains but, actually, it's far more complex than that, like in real life that no one thing or one person is ever just truly good or truly evil, but they're made up of so many different things that that that influence them. That direct their actions, that affect their behaviour. And that's no different when creating disabled characters.

NATALIE:

Starting to think about how you develop your characters. Now we're gonna talk a little bit about narratives around disability, um – so disability should really be enriching your story and never used as an add-on. If you're just using it as an add-on, then it's not gonna work. It's a bit like putting a crazy clown hat on a character who's in you know, an office situation. What is this? What is it adding? It's just kind of incongruous. So you really need to think about embedding disability into your characters and understanding the barriers your characters may face due to not simply their disability, whether it's physical or invisible. But also their environment and their community.

So maybe, um, Matilda, maybe you want to talk a little bit about that because you as a – writing for wheelchair users, you have a great depth of knowledge as opposed to someone yhat hasn't got that experience, and they may have chatted to a couple wheelchair users, but they're not really understanding exactly what happens on a kind of day to day basis.

MATILDA IBINI:

Yeah, I think it's really important as writers when we are writing out of our own experiences or even information, that you kind of reach out to people. That if you don't personally know anyone or haven't had experiences of a particular kind of disability, it is worthwhile getting in contact with someone and finding out a way to not just kind of – um, you're not just approaching them for the sake of like, 'Oh it's because I'm developing a story around this character.' But you want to develop an understanding that means that the characters are portrayed in a much more meaningful way.

Because I think when, at least historically, when we look at the depiction of disabled characters, they tend to be from the non-disabled perspective. And at times that means your imagination is slightly limited from a lack of awareness, a lack of knowing anyone from that particular community. And what your work shouldn't do is further harm a community by continuing to perpetuate a stereotype that then harms their experience in the real world. So I think it's always important to kind of reach out if you can, and also be honest about your intention as a writer. That you want to be able to depict something with far more honesty and authenticity. And you want to engage in that community and better understand the barriers they face and how the condition affects the way they are able to move through the world.

And I don't think – I think we have a responsibility as artists to be honest and open about that but also be thoughtful in our approach when approaching people because sometimes this can be my sensitive, and this is, this can be quite, since it can be quite a sensitive subject. And you don't really want to go around just asking people to share their pain with you, or share their most traumatic events with you but rather that you're trying to build a character, and you want to kind of be informed in a more meaningful and authentic way.

NATASHA SUTTON WILLIAMS:

So, yeah it's kind of about being honest about your intention as a writer to depict disabled characters and when approaching members of those disabled communities, when you want to find out more about a condition, it's about gaining an understanding and being inspired. And when you receive that information, it's like a springboard for your writing. As opposed to a kind of taking word- for-word verbatim someone's personal experience.

MATILDA IBINI:

And research is really important and talking to people. Because no disabled person is an Oracle. They're not an Oracle of everyone in their community. They are – no one person can speak for an entire community, so it's worth getting different perspectives. And finding different people and asking those people that you meet if they're open to it, to introducing to other people, to see how their experiences are either different or similar.And really exploring why that is within your story.

NATASHA SUTTON WILLIAMS:

Yeah, let's say you were writing a character that was a physiotherapist, the best thing for you to do is go do a load of research, talk to a physiotherapist. But maybe don't just talk to one physiotherapist, talk to multiple ones. Because they will all have a different perspective on their profession.

So, same thing with the disabled community, if you are writing a character who has cerebral palsy, talk to lots of different people if they're happy to about their experience so you can get inspired. Because again there's a spectrum, and the spectrum with disabilities in terms of – with every single disability some people are going to like, for example – If you're visually impaired, some people are going to be like 100% blind, some people are going to be visually impaired just slightly and then there's a whole breadth of other people. So it's about really trying to investigate and

Interrogate that whole community, that whole world and then you go, okay my character is gonna be this, for this reason. And you've really got a whole, you've got a bunch of information and knowledge to back up that idea. As opposed to, they're blind because they're in a horror film and that would be like the creepiest thing, okay?

So let's talk a little bit about casting and working with disabled performers.

MATILDA IBINI:

So if your work – if you are writing or creating work, and you want to open it up the way you cast, a good, essentially tip I was given, was sometimes being quite clear when you're describing your characters in the cast list, so that it's an invitation for a performer who might meet that criteria to make it their own.

So, for example, when I wrote *Little Miss Burden* all the sisters are black because I have black sisters but, specifically, *Little Miss Burden*, I've written that that character can be performed by someone with a physical impairment and/or a wheelchair user. And that I'm open, and it doesn't have to be – just because I'm a wheelchair user now, or that in the story the character has to be a wheelchair user, but it could also be someone with a physical impairment, and I think it's giving face and room for the performers to make those characters their own.

And that's just kind of like a really small starting point in terms of trying to open up characters and casting them to maybe, characters that you may not have thought were disabled in the story but could be performed by disabled performers.

NATASHA SUTTON WILLIAMS:

Yeah, and that's a really great invitation because if you feel – if you're writing a piece that, let's say you were writing a piece that's like actually, it doesn't matter what gender these characters are! Or you're writing a piece, a bit like the Sarah Kane's – the name escapes me, the psychosis one? *4.48 Psychosis*? Yep, *4.48 Psychosis*! That can be performed by one performer, that can be performed by a hundred performers. If you're writing something that's a little bit more abstract in that way.

But even if you're writing, let's say a kitchen sink drama. And you've written it, and you go, actually, you know what? I'm open to actually having a disabled actor perform this. I haven't written it as a disabled character, however, I'm open to this being cast with disabled performers in mind. And then you can work with the director, you can work with that actor and go, 'Okay, so if Bobby was deaf or had a hearing impairment, how would that affect the story?' And then suddenly all this kind of enriching material comes out.

What we're not trying to say is, on the one hand, we're saying if you were specifically eriting a disabled character, you really need to mind that world, so that's one kind of example of writing for disabled characters and obviously disabled performers. But in another way it's like, I've got this, how about... Let's say you, we're doing an adaptation of *A View From A Bridge* by Arthur Miller. What if one of those characters is disabled? Then what happens and what opens up there? So it's., we're kind of discussing two different areas of thoughts on this.

MATILDA IBINI:

And I think it's just worth exploring in the sense of, you just to stop us looking at disability as a kind of tick-box exercise, that by just simply having a disabled character, is enough. Or even just having a single disabled performer in an entire show is enough. But actually, disability is such a spectrum that how can the performer and their skills inform the story in new ways and interesting ways. And it should be essentially like an invitation to collaborate, that because the work is still developing, the work is never finished. Even when it's on the stage, you're still refining it and honing it. And it changes in the rehearsal room, so it's kind of making your work a little more open, a little more accessible. And not falling into the essential traps at times.

Or kind of this, yeah, I'd say yeah a – kind of cycle where people or artists only want to work with disabled performers who have the minimal list of access needs. Like that's that in itself is another kind of form of discrimination, where you only want to work with people whose access needs fit into a certain box. And that's not collaboration, that's not what theatre is about! Theatre should be opening up not closed, not shutting down.

NATASHA SUTTON WILLIAMS:

And it's a similar thing in terms of race, it's a similar thing in terms of gender, it's a similar thing in terms of sexuality. You know, why can't this character be Indian? Why can't this character be South American? Why can't this character be a woman? Why can't this character be bisexual?

Why can't this character be non-binary? You know all this stuff that people are thinking about.

And so how can you think about that in terms of disability?

And I think there's also this thing that people are genuinely scared. And people are also scared to offend. And I think if you're willing to kind of open up and be open to the fact that you might say something wrong, someone else might say something wrong but like let's try to work together and and push through this so that actually people do have more opportunities and you're going: 'I actually don't know about this can you tell me about this?'

As opposed to going, 'I don't want to offend. I don't want to get into that troubled place.' 'This feels like a lot of work. I'm just gonna leave it and let somebody else do it.' So what we're trying to say is, we want to encourage people to be as open as they possibly can, as inclusive as they possibly can. Especially in this moment where see, and also this thing that you know, one in five people are disabled, right? So why is that not being represented on stage?

If theatre is a representation of the human condition, a representation of like community and community coming together, how come we're not seeing more disabled characters? It's there. It's real. It's actually something that people can respond to because they have specific experiences and even if they don't have a specific experience, maybe their sister does, maybe their grandma does, maybe their uncle does. You know? So it's actually – what you're doing is you're mining the human condition so, it actually, it provides drama, it provides action, it provides authenticity. And reality to your work, which can only be a good thing.

MATILDA IBINI:

Definitely, 100% agree!

NATASHA SUTTON WILLIAMS:

So do you want to talk a little bit, Matilda, about writing forward disabled performers?

MATILDA IBINI:

Yes. So I guess especially when I was writing *Little Miss Burden*, for example, I think it's important to think about how the performer can inform the work. And how – and that's kind of like one of the truest tenants of theatre, is that kind of collaboration where the writer can not – you're not just writing a play or just writing the story, but how your work is a kind of invitation to bring collaborators on board.

So when writing for disabled performers, you kind of you want to almost leave gaps in your work. I'm not saying you don't finish the script but you're kind of leaving gaps maybe in the some of the characterisations for the actor, for the disabled performer to fill in. But as we said before – kind of like clues or hints that help them discover but also build the character for themselves. Because all disabled performers have so many skill sets, you know? Anything from circus to singing – not just music to rap to, any kind of live art performance skill. And you kind of want to bring that out.

You want your performer to be able to not just be this incredible character that you're writing but also able to bring their best selves, their best skills to the table. I think what was really great when I was writing, was discovering in the rehearsal period at least, what those skills were and how can we make, how could we best make use of this? And the actress that I wrote for was incredibly funny, just really naturally had this brilliant comic timing, And I thought – I need to use that. That's such a brilliant skill. I want to create scenes or scenarios where that can come across. So I think it's really, yeah. I think like trying to allow your work to feel like it's an invitation for a performer to step into and for them to discover how can they best, not just portray this character, but also how can some of the skills that they have be useful for this character?

NATASHA SUTTON WILLIAMS:

And with your piece *Little Miss Burden*, you knew that they were going to be in a wheelchair or have a physical impairment in some way right?

MATILDA IBINI:

Yeah.

NATASHA SUTTON WILLIAMS:

When we did the first RND – the first research and development of *Lesbian Pirates* we knew we wanted to work with three female-identifying disabled performers, but we were super open to having anyone that was kind of right for the show which was – an important thing was they really needed to be able to sing. So we needed to have disabled performers that were fantastic singers

But we weren't – we didn't like screw-down what those specific disabilities were gonna be. Maybe later in the project, we might go – okay they really need X, Y & Z but currently, at this moment –I'm like it doesn't the story -- they are disabled characters but the show is not about their disability. They just happen to be disabled, so you can work it in different ways. Those are two different ways *Little Miss Burden* and *Lesbian Pirates*, both working with disabled performers but in slightly different ways.

So talking about *Lesbian Pirates*, let's talk a little bit about depicting sexuality in disabled characters. And this is something that I think, is really fascinating and really underutilized. Traditionally, disabled characters have been robbed of their sexuality and their sense of desire. And being desirable, so like all characters they will have a sexuality, whether it is inherently developed within them or not. So what I mean by, that is you might have a character who is super promiscuous, or you might have a character who is asexual, or you might have a character who is quite nervous sexually. So you can have all these – just like with able-bodied characters. So we need to be thinking about disabled characters and them having a sexuality. And again on the spectrum, where does that particular character lie?

MATILDA IBINI:

Absolutely and also thinking about the potential that gives to disabled performers to play sexual beings, and it's exciting, rich territory that hasn't, if I'm honest, been fully explored. There's so much I feel like the term you said Natasha, in terms of like, disabled characters have been robbed. It's such – it's so true! It's so true to the depictions, at least that we've seen, and I think in order to write or authentic, compelling disabled characters you need to be thinking about all facets of their identity, as you would do with non-disabled characters. And sexuality is a facet of all of our identities, regardless of where we fall on the spectrum of sexual identity, it is there.

And not addressing that in disabled characters does such a disservice to not just the storytelling, to that character but also the representation we then see on stage. And then take and replicate in real life, so thinking about and addressing that in the story, or at least in your, in the development of your character should be – is really important, as with all the other facets about how your character relates to other characters. Whether or not they fall in love, you know you can't forget that disabled parents do exist! Disabled people are having sex, they are having children! That is just a fact of life, so that too should be represented in storytelling and in your characters.

NATASHA SUTTON WILLIAMS:

Yeah, *Jellyfish* that was on at the Bush, and then transferred to The National is a really good example of a play which has a disabled parent in it. And it's all about her having this baby, and how society is like, 'No you shouldn't do that', and she's like ‘Yeah, I'm gonna be a mum.' And like 'I want to do this and I'm gonna do it,' you know?

So it's really interesting and unusual territory that really has not been mined in the moment. So you know this idea of the untold stories, untold narratives, like there's actually, really rich stuff out there. And if you want to kind of put yourself, if want to show yourself, like a spotlight of you in the crowd, that kind of story is very interesting, and we need more people to talk about that.

I'm also addressing the historical depiction of disabled characters and narratives. The, you know. They've been...There just hasn't been this three-dimensional work. So that's what we're really trying to encourage is, we're trying to encourage this three-dimensional – no one is a villain, no one is a saint. Where do they lie on the sexual spectrum? Where do they lie on the moral spectrum? How do they relate to their environment? How do other people relate to them in their environment? All this kind of stuff. It's like, it's really rich territory to to be thinking about.

MATILDA IBINI:

And it should never be seen as extra work, like this is the work, as writers, we do when developing all our characters. And that should never be an exception just because your character is disabled. That when you're working with a disabled performer, it is actually our responsibility to make sure all the characters we are developing are three-dimensional and dynamic and have flaws but also have intentions and desires across all facets of our identities. Because that it what it means to be human.

NATASHA SUTTON WILLIAMS:

So now we're gonna talk a little bit about writers who have disabilities. If you are a disabled writer, you are allowed to write about other subjects that have nothing to do with disability.

MATILDA IBINI:

Preach!

[THEY LAUGH AND GIGGLE]

NATASHA SUTTON WILLIAMS:

So never feel pressured to write about your personal experience. The same can be said about BAME writers, LGBTQ+ writers. You don't have to write about your personal experience. And your personal experiences may lead you to themes and subjects that you want to write about. For instance, social prejudices or jealousies Or you know, there's just so much, you know? Friendship, love all this kind of like really big subject matter. War.

You know you don't have to specifically write a play about your personal experience. I mean Matilda, you can talk a little bit about that.

MATILDA IBINI:

Yeah, as someone who has written about their personal experience, I think that's it for me. In terms of a piece – *Little Miss Burden* was like my pièce de résistance of that. I've written something very close to home about what it was like for me to grow up with my very particular kind of condition in my very particular kind of household and culture.

However, when I go forward and write other things, whether they be about bullying and/or the tech world, or climate change that lens of being a black disabled queer woman will always be in all my work. Like, whether I want it to or not, because of that's part of my voice. As a writer that, our voices are essentially like a kind of amalgamation of our identities, of our experiences. And that gives us a very particular way of looking at the world and experiencing the world and the topics.

So you could commission 10 writers all to write about climate change, and they'll all come up with ten very different plays because we've all come from different walks of life. We've all had different experiences and all of those things inform our voices as writers, so even if I don't go on to write anymore things about my childhood, but just my lens of what I've seen growing up in the world, what I've experienced will shape the way I look at certain topics. Or things that interest me or things that I want to investigate and find out more about.

And I think for me at least personally, I think I write a lot about disability now is because I want to remind people essentially that disabled people exist in the world. We have been always been here and definitely aren't going anywhere! And so why can't disabled people then exist in an imagined world? The same can be said for all marginalized groups, including women. That people that are pushed out of spaces and de-platformed, there are so many people in the world. And your job as a writer is to capture that variety of work and experiences, that variety of ways humans can exist in the world. And I kind of feel really passionately about it when I'm writing disabled characters because I'm trying to show that disabled people – there is no one face of disability. There is no one mold of disability, there's no one shape. There's no one expression of disability. That disability is so varied because the human race is!

NATASHA SUTTON WILLIAMS:

Also it's this thing of, it's not a tick box exercise. Because you're engaging with characters who have incredibly rich stories, and so why not utilize that? And why not put something on stage that people haven't seen before? Isn't that? You know, when we go see a show, and we're just like yawn, I like have seen this so many times. Like I want to see new things, you know? And everyone's talking about these untold stories that they're so desperate to hear – well okay, let's do it! You know? It is worth, it is worth really seriously considering.

So we've basically, we're talked about developing your characters, developing three-dimensional characters, whether they're able-bodied characters or disabled characters. And really doing your research and talking to like a wide range of people in the disabled community. We've talked about disabled characters, like able-bodied characters, have personality flaws because they're human. They're not saints and they're not villains. We talked about narratives around disability and how disability needs to enrich your story, and it's not just an add-on.

MATILDA IBINI:

We've talked about casting and working with disabled performers, and that there's different approaches to making your work more inclusive. And that it shouldn't, like we said earlier, it shouldn't feel like a tick-box exercise but actually, your responsibility as a storyteller is to represent the world and the people in it.

NATASHA SUTTON WILLIAMS:

Yeah, we've talked about depicting sexuality in disabled characters. And you know thinking, ‘Are they gay, straight, bisexual, asexual, pansexual, other sexual?’ And we've also talked about disabled writers, so writers that have some kind of disability, don't feel pressured into having to write your story and that's the only thing you have any expertise on. Because, as a human, you have a wide variety of opinions and thoughts about the world, so express those.

[AUDIO ENDS]